Klara's Story

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Klara's Story

by claritylore

Summary

Hannibal has a daughter, with big blue eyes and a frightening ability to empathise.

Will has spent 5 years in the Baltimore State Asylum for the Criminally Insane, accused of crimes he didn't commit.

Alana thinks it's time Will knew about Klara.

Notes

Borrowing the adorable Klara from Jagten (The Hunt):

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

It all went back to a single night when all the world looked different to Hannibal.

He usually hated any sense of losing control; he calculated the medians and indices of his movements through life like a gifted mathematician. Every permutation of his existence, and the interlocking existences of those around him, were the result of a predicted timeline with almost all variables accounted for. It was the reason he knew he could kill with impunity and stomp on every societal notion ever conceived of. His design was too complex; it existed in the shadows seen by madmen and poets alone, of whom there were too few to matter.

That night, however, he had let it all fly away. He'd stopped thinking and entered a grey area of his mind he'd forgotten how to inhabit.

His confrontation with the indulgent and sloppy Tobias Budge had been much as he predicted. He'd expected to be bruised and battered to a degree necessary to maintain his visage as a harmless psychiatrist and had welcomed the struggle, even letting it go on longer than it really needed to. The one thing he hadn't predicted was the strange surge of senselessness he'd felt knowing that Will Graham was very likely dead.

He'd sent his friend to the killer's lair fully cognisant of the reality that he might not return and at first it had affected him no more than any other game he'd ever played. He hadn't even really thought much about it when Tobias announced what he had done - "I've killed two men" - save to find it amusing to kill Franklyn in retaliation.

It was in the quiet moments, between staging the scene and hearing the FBI sirens approach, when he stopped and thought, really thought about it.

No more Will. His brilliant mind, his intriguing conversations, those precious rare moments when he forgot his reticence and eye contact was established, all gone. He would never again know the sweet scent of a genius' brain burning. Logically, it should have been a meaningless development; proof that Will was not worth his time, since he could not survive even the simplest of his games. Yet the idea of it left Hannibal with an odd ache inside. He didn't like it at all.

The rush of something intangible, perhaps relief, he felt when Will walked into the room was even worse. It was as if his own mind was betraying him. He couldn't even hide it from his face and it made it strangely difficult to concentrate on keeping his story straight for Jack Crawford.

That unintended show of weakness made him quiet and withdrawn after that. He also didn't like feeling as though he couldn't trust himself or his reactions.

When cleared to finally leave the crime scene, he'd struggled to stand from his chair. The thigh muscle of his right leg, punctured by a stab using his letter opener, complained severely. He'd been deeply surprised to feel a steel grip on his arm, steadying him. Will Graham never

touched people; it was a facet of his condition, whatever that was. He allowed touch on occasion but he never reached out himself. It was strangely gratifying to Hannibal to graduate as the exception to the rule, even if it was probably done without thought.

"Are you going to be alright?" Will asked, under his breath, only half looking at him.

That's when the grey zone of his mind descended and all of the numbers stopped moving. Hannibal looked away from Will, frowning. He couldn't think. Everything was centered down on the hand on his arm, as if it mattered to him somehow on a level things never normally mattered to him. He shook himself out of it just enough to say, "I killed him," because he knew it would speak to Will on an emotional level: Will who had not spoken for hours after killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs and who still carried his ghost around with him.

Will nodded, once, sharply. As he let his hand slip away, and after a long moment of contemplation, he asked, "Do you like gumbo?"

Hannibal blinked a few times, not quite comprehending. It took far longer than it should have for him to understand that Will was asking him over to his place. It was a rare enough occurrence to be exceedingly curious, and ordinarily a thousand little nuances of thought would have started to whirl in his mind about it. For once, his mind went blank and all he could do was respond with a slight lean in Will's direction and a nod.

This strange madman with a notion of chasing away his demons, as if that were even possible, had a dull fire in his eyes the entire journey back to his cabin home in Wolf Trap. And once in the car, Hannibal couldn't relax. He was alarmed by the sense that he had no idea what was going to happen and couldn't focus enough to contemplate how to turn Will's slow and unplanned move towards reciprocating his professed friendship to his advantage.

It took a good hour of conversation, that familiar staple of their relationship, and some port - a gift given to Will a long time ago - for his back to slide out of a ramrod and tense position. The gumbo was only reheated leftovers, and nothing of great interest on his palette, but Hannibal enjoyed it all the same. The whiskey that came after the port helped to soothe the worst of his aches and pains and when Will decided to light a fire in the living room area, despite the way his chimney breast was still a mess of temporary patchwork bricks, Hannibal let himself slide down onto the large wheel of cushions, in amongst the dogs, and relax. It was all very novel, shutting down like that, leaving all propriety behind, and letting the calm wash over him.

Will watched him with a note of surprise at first, as though he expected Hannibal to fuss over the hairs, or the smell; to avoid his family of stray dogs altogether and find a chair in the corner. But Hannibal was only half aware of him as he was lazily scratching one of the larger dogs behind the ears. A little white mutt with a distended underbite curled up against him and Hannibal sighed, sipping at his whiskey and staring into the slowly growing fire. He saw Will's shape find a spot near his leg and settle there, between a terrier and a big yellow mutt with dopey eyes.

They quietly talked about death, in the poetic way only they could. It didn't matter that Will didn't know that Hannibal was far better acquainted with it than he knew; that he courted it. It was escapism to talk about it as if Hannibal was new to the concept of destroying another

human being. And when Hannibal woke up in the early hours, he realised he had probably fallen asleep mid-sentence. He was part of a patchwork of fur and fabric, like a living mural, and the fire was diminished but not yet smothered.

He discovered Will curled against him, forehead to his hip, one arm thrown over his legs. The soreness of his injuries made him twitch and that caused two of the dogs to look up and Will to crack open an eye.

Hannibal felt too heavy to move; he hadn't drunk like that, for inebriation and keeping company than for sensory experience, for quite some time. Meanwhile Will watched him, apparently curious about what he would do. Hannibal realised his fingers were tangled in Will's curls and a note of alarm sounded through him. He extracted them, probably too quickly.

This was dangerous, in ways he hadn't anticipated once again. "I should leave," Hannibal mumbled with a scratchy voice.

"Take my bed," Will said in return, voice heavy with sleep.

Hannibal stared at him, all pretense of relaxation dissipating, tension replacing it. "It's not appropriate."

"You're not," Will said, and paused to yawn, "you're not my psychiatrist."

That wasn't it. Not at all. He continued to lay there, stiff as a board. Will's hand brushed over his hand and then curled into it unexpectedly.

"Stay." His eyes were sliding closed again.

"I'm inter." The words rumbled out of Hannibal like an earthquake. He could pinpoint the exact moment sleepy Will processed that information but didn't detect any reaction beyond a slight hitch in his breath. "Does that bother you?"

Will seemed to be drifting back to sleep already, his face shifted downwards against the cushion, eyes closed. No response was forthcoming, which came as something of a relief to Hannibal.

His head throbbing a little, Hannibal decided it would be better to leave before he made any more uncharacteristic confessions. But Will's hand squeezed his at the first hint of movement, hard and pressing, making it clear that he was not going to be leaving.

Although Hannibal had shared that particular detail on very few occasions, he knew to expect a generally negative reaction. There was a lingering perception, no matter how enlightened society had become about such variations, that the rare ability to bear children was a freakish misalignment of masculinity. Most heterosexual men shunned inters on an instinctive level.

Hannibal stared down at Will's face, beautiful and illuminated as it was in flickering light and dark by the fire, not sure what he was feeling or doing anymore.

"I could have lost you tonight," Will said, suddenly, as if he'd been struggling with the decision of whether to say it out loud or not. "I felt... lost."

"Same," Hannibal confessed, and sighed. One of the dogs started licking his cheek as if trying to comfort him. It was a genuinely strange and unprecedented situation in his life, lying there in a rough pile with seven dogs and someone he called a friend, and generally meant it.

Will shifted a little so he could rest his chin on his arm and look up at him. "Proximity is difficult for you."

Though his ultimate goal had always been to make Will understand him and embrace the killer he saw through the cracks in his sanity, it remained novel hearing Will take on his inflections and manner of speech when he was particularly focused in on him. "Not difficult. Undesirable."

Thoughts, like little jolts of thunder hitting the ground, seemed to light up Will's eyes. "You're uncomfortable."

"I find myself wondering if you would run to tell Alana Bloom if this proximity resulted in a kiss."

A bemused grin spread across Will's face. "I don't find you that attractive," he said, though the way he let his hand slip onto the soft curve of Hannibal's belly, the only discernible physical sign of his inter genetics, seemed calculated to imply otherwise.

"No longer in need of a clutch for balance?" And in that moment, as their formative conversation replayed in his mind, Hannibal saw himself in a clearer prism than ever before. He saw himself sending Will to his likely death as a consequence of their conversation; that failed attempt to kindle an affair with his protegé, Alana. There had been a spark, small but meaningful, of jealousy that he hadn't allowed himself to acknowledge at the time. Will's confrontation with Tobias Budge was a mere spillage of his crueler inclinations.

Some of the dogs perked up as their Master sat himself up and leaned on his hand. There was something in Will's eyes which was telling Hannibal to take his lead, so he also sat up and swallowed back the lightheartedness it resulted in.

Will was the initiator of the kiss that occurred next.

It was clumsy, rough with combined stubble, and tasted of state whiskey, but it did something to Hannibal's insides almost instantly. The rare sensation of a shift inside, the telltale wetness that told him that his birth canal had moved into place to redirect the use of his rear cavity and the rush of blood all over, left him stumbling for air and robbed him of what remained of his logical senses. The calculating killer took a much needed slumber and the person at the kernel of his being, a far simpler creature, drifted into control.

"This is a bad idea isn't it?" Will gasped as he too snatched for breath. He was clinging onto Hannibal's arms now.

"Unquestionably."

"Too damaged..."

"No," Hannibal was quick to stop that train of thought. "You are not damaged, you are unique. I just believe we will need to return to the boundaries of friendship tomorrow. It would be better for the both of us to maintain a professional face to the outside world."

Will frowned. "Are you sure you want th...?"

Hannibal sealed his lips back in place over Will's, preventing any further utterance of doubt, partly to purge his friend of any doubt about what he wanted, and partly because he knew that if he paused to think for too long he would not be able to continue.

The kissing was more confident the second time, Will climbing closer and letting his reticence fall away, Hannibal allowing himself to feel something, just a little.

And that was how the mistake that changed everything happened. Hannibal looked back on that night with a sort of curious detachment, as though it was someone else's memory merely lent to him. He thought about it rarely, and only in the darkest of his dark nights alone.

He recalled the way Will had taken his hand and pressed him down onto the bed that Will kept, inexplicably, in the corner of the living room rather than upstairs. The way the orange flickering glow captured everything, all of Will's angles and the sheen of his skin without clothing on it, rendered it easy to recall the scene like it was a painting.

Hannibal couldn't deny that remembering their one ill fated night of passion didn't still give him a tingling sensation, low in his belly. It was odd to remember how Will had been so curious about the way his body reacted to his touch, the gush of sweetly scented dew that flowed freely from him, his insides reacting to his desire for Will as obviously as his exterior organ; and wasn't Will just so pleased at the sight of Hannibal coming undone for him. It seemed to make him bolder than usual.

Will had waited until they were chest to chest, mouths bruised from kissing, to ask about protection and Hannibal had stupidly dismissed it as unnecessary. He'd believed he was too old to concern himself with the prospect of pregnancy and he knew there was no disease that he could catch; he could smell the purity of his blood on Will's breath. All he'd wanted in that moment was to give in to his biology, to let Will confirm to him that he was real, he was alive; to let their mental connection expand into the physical, just the once.

The experience was odd and beautiful. The sensation of being stretched out, disarmed at the most intimate level, was blinding in its simple joy. Will was sweetly careful with him, very aware of his bruises and wounds, instinctively knowing that this was not a frequent occurrence for Hannibal and that he needed to go slowly. The natural interlock of their bodies, Hannibal long and lean with muscle, Will strong and sharply built too but a little more stout, was breathtakingly poetic to Hannibal's nature. He let the room and the world fall away and centred his whole self into the pounding pleasure and the taste of Will Graham's skin, gasping and keening with complete abandon at their joining. His Inter biology allowed him to come several times without even being touched, his toes curling, his muscles tensing

all over with every cresting release, each of the spermless fluidic orgasms better than the last as his body waited for the final trigger to a great explosion.

For that, he needed Will to really rut into him, forcing himself deep, into the secret well inside him that had never been claimed before. He needed the thin wall at the mouth of it to be broken. Will seemed to understand what had to happen, without even really knowing what he was doing. He strained and pushed against it and a faint sound, almost like a breathless growl, blew out of his lungs when it finally snapped and let him through. Hannibal recalled the shock of the feeling, being breached deep inside, his vestigial womb opened and then filled up with Will's release, his own full ejaculation powerful enough to make his eyes roll back into his head and his ability to breathe halted for so long he nearly passed out.

Of course, everything had had to go back to normal in the harsh light of day. Hannibal had never had much difficulty switching his emotions off when required, and by his calculations, the experience would be useful only as a means to keep Will coming back to him, again and again, as his encephalitis worsened. He had firmly planted himself in the ground beneath Will's feet as his patch of stability by letting his barriers down like that. Though it would need to be a careful game of chess, it was still a game at the end of the day, with a companion in the dance of death, a madman to call his own, the more meaningful prize than a means to scratch a physical itch.

When Hannibal thought about that night in his darker hours, he usually treaded along the floorboards of his upstairs landing, taking practiced care to avoid the noisier spots, and stood in the doorway down the way from his own. He looked in on the sleeping angel lying there in her little bed, blonde wisps of hair glinting like strands of gold in the dim glow from the nightstand, and smiled at the scent of her presence.

Hannibal had continued pushing Will into a slow descent towards madness after that night, hoping he would come around to his way of thinking eventually. He'd still killed Georgia Madchen and prepared those lures to frame Will when he'd realised that Will was getting too close to figuring out who he really was. He'd still murdered Abigail Hobbs and stuffed her ear down Will's throat, just to ensure the evidence against him would be difficult to refute. He'd still visited Will in his new prison home and gloated at his triumph, because now Will could rant and rave about his murders all he wanted without ever being believed.

He'd only realised, with absolute awe and horror, that he was pregnant long after the damage was done in that regard. And five years ago, he'd had to walk away from Will Graham and all his hopes for him because of it.

Klara had ruined everything but he had no regrets. She was a very special little girl.

One day, she was going to be a killer too. She would learn from him, the old Master, and surpass him. She would be everything he had ever wanted.

Sometimes Hannibal felt a pang of regret that Will would never meet her, or even know of her existence, locked away in the Baltimore Prison for the Criminally Insane with no chance of reprieve as he was. But mostly, he accepted it was for the best, and watched Klara sleep, content to be the sole shaping force in her life.

Chapter 2

Jack Crawford alone had always known the truth about Klara.

There had been no way around it. On the day that it dawned on Hannibal that there was a reason he was having difficulty keeping his food down and felt so much more fatigued than ever before, and why his clothes were growing uncomfortable, he had made the calculation that he was going to need some help. An unwitting ally.

Hannibal had known that a measure of the truth was his best means to gain control of the situation. Even though he had been thoroughly vetted following Will's immediate accusations of wrongdoing and placed beyond suspicion by the FBI for lack of evidence, he couldn't simply move away for a while and deal with the situation privately, as was his immediate inclination.

He'd confirmed that he was pregnant on same the day that Will Graham had been released from the medical hospital, his gunshot wound sufficiently healed, his encephalitis finally chased away; the day he was placed into the psychiatric one. His final conversation with Will had consisted of a dark promise of retribution from his friend and Hannibal's every fibre of being had wanted to stay and begin the process of regaining Will's trust. It was his nature to want to continue the games. His curiosity about Will was a burning candle that just never seemed to die out.

But the damage was done. He'd had no desire for his situation to become general knowledge.

He'd ruled out an abortion immediately because the idea of bearing a child with Will's genetic legacy and his own combined filled him with curiosity and no small amount of anticipation. Such a child could not help but be supremely superior mentally; an artist in waiting. He had no right to deny its place in the world.

So he decided to engineer a way to manipulate the head of the FBI's Behavioural Sciences Unit into helping him. He'd invited Jack to dinner and worn his most figure hugging outfit. He'd let his tiredness and malaise show through, and prepared something a little less cohesive than normal, more in accordance with his mix of cravings than the dictates of fine cuisine. Never a man to mince his words, Hannibal had confessed his status as an Inter and explained his regrettable lapse of judgement in letting Will bed him. He'd stated that he hoped to leave Baltimore for a while and that it was imperative that no one, not Will, not anyone who associated with him, be told why he was gone. He knew he needed Jack's taciturn assistance in leaving town without arousing any further suspicions.

It was all a trick of phrasing, of course, but Jack Crawford was unable to be too angry with him. Not when he explained that it had been a single occasion following the trauma of taking the life of Tobias Budge, when they'd both thought the other dead. Hannibal had already made it his business to be a close part of Bella Crawford's rapidly diminishing life, knowing that it would create a sense of indebtedness to him in Jack, for watching over her while the cancer slowly broke her into nothing. The numbers of the equation came together as he

intended when Jack agreed to keep his secret and to let him leave quietly, his sense of gratitude overtaking his better judgement.

He was the only one who knew though. Hannibal took up residence in his holiday home on the Florida coast, near a private hospital with a maternity/internity unit of high calibre. He'd passed the time quietly, the urge to hunt and kill temporarily overtaken by the urge to nest and protect himself. The blue of the ocean reminded him of Will's eyes. He stared at it often.

Klara was born a few days late but without any other complications. On Hannibal's return to Baltimore to restart his practice and return to his favoured hunting grounds, he had little choice but to introduce his baby to Alana Bloom. She hadn't guessed Klara's real origin because she hadn't known he was an Inter; she assumed Hannibal had got some bright young thing in trouble and left to deal with that situation, hence the return to his home with an unannounced child. He was content to let that story become the rumour.

Alana was still visiting Will on occasion, which presented Hannibal with something of a problem. Fortunately, it took very little to persuade her not to give Will any updates on Hannibal's living situation. He spun a story of feeling uneasy that, should Will somehow escape, his child might come to harm at the hands of such a dangerous psychopath, given his fixated maintenance of Hannibal's guilt. Alana was adamant that Will was making progress and incapable of that now, but she did as he asked. It wasn't as if he asked after Hannibal anymore now anyway, she said.

Hannibal found her blindness quite remarkable sometimes, given how Klara's resemblance to Will seemed to be more obvious with every passing year. Five years on and she still she believed her own accepted reality. Klara had Will's nose and ears, and most obviously, his eyes, though the curve of her mouth and her fine blonde hair came directly from his own genetic pool. But more than that, she definitely had Will's remarkable vision. His empathy lived in her, fully in evidence to those who cared to look, inherited with no more fanfare than the more obvious similarities.

He liked to test her with games involving patterns and puzzles, watching her development closely and challenging her daily. As Hannibal had hoped, she was already intriguing in her advanced thought processes and general abilities. She was a calm child, artistic and thoughtful, without the nervous trappings of sensitivity that Hannibal had feared she might possess. The only concern, repeatedly given to him by teachers, was that she did not enjoy the company of other children and had difficulty making friends. This was entirely understandable to Hannibal, given that she was mentally far beyond her peers. Klara was very much his daughter and he enjoyed her presence more than he had ever expected to.

That familiar legacy was the side he was actively working on bringing out. But it was the side of her which belonged to Will, the side that simply couldn't hide away much longer, which finally shattered the peaceful shape of their lives.

He invited Jack Crawford and Alana Bloom to dine with him one evening. Klara always enjoyed Alana's visits because she would invariably bring along at least one of the remaining dogs for the little girl to play with. On this evening, Klara had decided to skip dessert in favour of chasing Bentley the Jack Russell around the house and none of the adults had had

the heart to send her to bed, even though the hour was late. She had behaved very well throughout the dinner party after all.

Things were quiet when they left the table and went to the adjoining living room. But all hell broke free when they came upon Klara sitting in front of eight or so crime scene photos, laid out on the floor, taken from a case file in Jack Crawford's briefcase. She was looking at some very disturbing images of two or three dead women, all with large diagonal pieces of skin missing from their backs.

Alarmingly, she had placed three of her dollies on the floor next to them, their clothes removed and left to one side. Bentley was sitting with her, observing quietly.

Jack snatched the photos up frantically but Klara didn't start, even as Hannibal swept her into his arms, playing the part of concerned father.

"Klara that was very rude," he said, "we do not take things that don't belong to us, do we?"

"They look like dollies," she said without a trace of alarm, "real pretty. Someone wants their clothes. Skin clothes. Someone wants to dress up too." Hannibal could feel her pulse through the wrists against his neck, perfectly steady and calm; potentially another trait from her Lecter genetics.

The look Crawford was giving her was partly that of astonishment, partly that of extreme emotion. Tears were welling in his eyes. "She's got Will's perception."

Hannibal's mouth pressed into a thin white line. He knew Jack had realised his mistake the moment the words left his mouth but it was too late.

"Will? What does Will have to do with anything?" Alana snapped.

"Nothing at all," Hannibal said, frowning, clutching Klara close. "Now say sorry to Uncle Jack for your rudeness."

"Sorry Uncle Jack," Klara said and looked contrite, though Hannibal could tell it wasn't said sincerely.

Alana was looking back and forth between them both, some sort of realisation dawning visibly on her face. "Oh Hannibal," she gasped, "tell me she's not..."

"Alana," he jumped in quickly, "it's not important."

"I'm sorry," Jack mumbled, rubbing his forehead. "I didn't mean..."

"I think perhaps our evening has come to a natural close." Hannibal's voice was very well practiced in politeness and restraint but this sudden turn of events was testing the boundaries of his of control.

"No, this is... I need to know the truth." Alana's voice had taken on that tense authority it did when she was about to get extremely angry and upset.

Hannibal sighed. "Klara, take Bentley into the garden for a run before bedtime please," he said, putting his daughter down. She nodded and did as he asked, apparently sensing a need to let the adults speak alone.

"I do not believe this matter is anyone's business other than ours but I happen to be Inter. You cannot blame me for disassociating my child's name from that of a serial murderer. Even if he is her father."

"But Will never said anyth.... Oh god, he has no idea has he?" Alana suddenly switched her wrath to Jack, who was leaning brokenly against the side of the couch. "And you knew? All this time?"

Jack looked at her with nothing but tiredness. It was the expression he had worn almost exclusively in the years since Bella's death. He had all the malaise of a man barely clinging to his own mind. "Yes," he said, and stared down at the crime scene photos in his hands, disassociating himself from the swelling argument.

Her hand was over her mouth and she was shaking her head. "You were his psychiatrist, Hannibal," she said, quiet with rage.

"Not officially..."

"You were his psychiatrist!" she yelled. "A position of trust. How could you...?

A delightful cornucopia of grisly potential murder tableaus flashed before his eyes, Alana at the centre of them. "My association with Will Graham was entirely professional, bar a single incident. We discussed the matter and he agreed that it was more important I continue in the capacity of therapist over anything else I might have been, and so it was not repeated." Hannibal told the story smoothly, with lidded eyes. "It did not affect my treatment of him in any way."

She was looking at a photograph of Hannibal and Klara on his mantelpiece; the only photo he possessed with a familial theme in the entire house.

"Skin clothes," Jack muttered, looking through the photos, his forehead furrowed.

"Jack?" Hannibal asked, glad of the distraction.

"Sorry. I uh, really shouldn't have brought this file with me. I don't know what I was thinking. I hope she isn't traumatised."

Hannibal resisted the smile. "My daughter is very resilient." While he did not allow her to witness his hunts, or the nastier aspects of his food preparations, she had seen and heard enough to be sufficiently desensitised to find mere photos of corpses of little concern. "I hope she has been of help."

"Will needs to know," Alana said, her face made of stone. "You can't keep this from him. It's not fair."

"Alana," Jack boomed, suddenly. "That is not your decision to make."

Her eyes flashed as she moved to change her tactic of confrontation. "He is making progress. You know that. His appeal is looking promising."

"Appeal?" Hannibal interjected. Though the temptation was there, he had made an effort to avoid any discussion on the subject of Will Graham, knowing the fire of curiosity was still burning too brightly in him to trust himself not to get involved again.

"To be transferred to a minimum security institution downstate. He's got years of good behaviour on his side and no obvious signs of recurrence of the psychosis that caused his murder spree." The misplaced emotion on her face made Hannibal want to rip it off. "He's crumbling. That place is killing him... nearly killed him. But if he knew... if he knew he had a daughter, he'd..."

"He'd what?" Crawford's voice was hard and skeptical.

"Have something to live for. Something to get better for."

There was something more behind her words, Hannibal could sense it. Something flashed across Jack's eyes too, a note of understanding that passed between them and neutered the argument all of a sudden.

It had only one possible explanation for her words and his reaction; the ghost of Bella and her ill fated suicide attempt still sitting beside Jack, always. "Has Will attempted to take his own life?"

Alana's expression answered in place of her voice.

"Would it not be far crueler to impose upon him the knowledge that he has a child he will never see?" Hannibal asked, attempting to wrest the conversation back in his direction.

"Hannibal, Will was sick when he did what he did. He was unconscious the whole time." She turned to Jack, appealing for support. "I know you believe that too," she said, and turned back to Hannibal, moving towards him, her eyes wide and pleading. "And we're so close to proving it, using new studies of how the brain reacts to certain stimuli when under the influence of neurological disease. The appeal case is looking strong. If he gets transferred, he'll have a lot more freedom. You could visit him... with Klara. Will can have a relationship with her."

Hannibal gave her a cold look. "Regardless of your sentiments, Will killed Abigail Hobbs. I cannot risk that he would do the same to this daughter."

"I think it's time we left." Jack Crawford had clearly had enough. "Thank you, Hannibal, for another exceptional meal. You're the only thing standing between me and starvation."

"A pleasure, of course," he replied, and saw Jack to the door. Alana followed behind, clearly reluctant but holding her tongue.

Klara returned and gave Bentley back over to Alana. She gave them both a cheerful farewell, topped off with a yawn, and obeyed her father's request for her to go and brush her teeth

before bedtime.

Hannibal bid his guests goodnight and returned to the living room. He couldn't help but smile a little when he noticed that the photograph of himself and Klara was gone from the mantelpiece. Despite his protests to the contrary, that slight tug towards Will meant that he could not be too annoyed with Alana for taking it with her, with an obvious intention.

Perhaps it was time to let Will have his "something to live for". Or, more accurately, something fight for. He'd clearly hit a low point of some kind. Quite banal really, for him to seek such an unremarkable exit. Will was capable of so much more, given the proper stimuli.

Hannibal made the decision there and then to let events take their natural course.

He was, once again, just so terribly curious about what Will would do.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> WARNING: this chapter contains suicidal and dark thoughts from a main character and might be triggering. Avoid if necessary.

"Hello Will."

It had been so long since he'd heard that sonorous voice, he had almost forgotten it. Even now, it set his teeth on edge. He contemplated getting up but didn't have the energy to do much more than turn his head in its direction.

Through the distant bars of his private nightmare, the looming figure of Jack Crawford stood in a patch of focused light.

Will slowly turned his head back and stared at the grey ceiling through his eyelashes. There were nine hundred and twenty seven circles in the pattern across the entirety of its expanse. He'd counted them all countless times. It was harder to see them now that he'd broken the light and used a piece of the plastic to stab himself in the neck; the replacement lighting system had a thicker casing to prevent him from making a second attempt. It blocked everything out into a dim fuzz.

"Will?"

There didn't seem to be much point in talking to him. The bandages on his throat felt restrictive, like he might stop breathing at any moment. Speaking through the sensation was an alien concept. Will had no idea what would come out; whether it would even sound human anymore. He didn't feel real enough to make a sound, even if he tried.

"Is he on any sort of drugs right now?" he heard Jack ask, aside.

The slithering tones of Dr Chilton made his skin clammy and cold. "We're trying a few different combinations of antidepressants and the like."

A pause occurred. "Right. Are they working?" Jack asked, and Will almost wanted to scream. Except that he couldn't.

"It's hard to say. He's always been of a particularly belligerent nature."

People always talked about him like he wasn't there. It used to make him extremely angry. Now he just didn't care. Most of the time he wasn't there anyway.

Will wanted to itch at the bandages and tear the wound open again, to feel the blood dripping down his skin. Cutting into his neck had been the first time he'd felt alive for years. But now his hands were strapped down most of the time. One of the nurses had promised he would be granted freedom in his cell again once he was healed and they were confident he wouldn't try to kill himself again. It was just another thing that didn't seem to matter; the ability to pace his cage was inconsequential. It was an illusion of freedom. At least there was a certain honesty to being completely rendered immobile.

"I have a case, Will." A pause. "I know it's been a long time but I think you can help on this one. Five women, similar profiles, all killed with the same brand of brutality. All are missing skin from their backs."

Something moved in Will's chest, a funny snap like a feeling. For a split second, he contemplated looking. The idea of losing himself in the mind of someone else, even a killer, was a tantalising level of escapism.

"We've got a theory that it's someone who is seeking to make some sort of skin suit but no leads except... a girl is missing and we think he keeps them alive for a few days before he kills them. We need your help to find her. Time is running out." There was a long pause. "Her name is Catherine Martin," he said, trying to make her real and human to him, instead of an abstract idea.

As soon as he was out of the leather cuffs, he was going to start trying to get one of the screws out of his bed frame. That was the next plan. It would be difficult but if he could get one, just one, he could gouge a hole in the other side of his neck and try to hit the artery. It might be possible.

"Will, are you hearing me?"

Nine hundred and twenty six circles on the ceiling. One was missing. He felt vaguely alarmed. He wondered where it had gone.

The sounds of his visitors died down with the slow clip of feet walking away. Two for Jack, two for Chilton, and the extra clump sound of the latter man's cane.

Will let his eyelids flutter. He wasn't dreaming but he wasn't really awake. He had no concept of time anymore, in the darkness of his empty cell. It took all his strength to just keep breathing nowadays. In his mind, he was in the river he used to fish in, lying at the bottom of it, waiting to drown.

Some time later, his cell was opened and orderlies unstrapped his binds. He stared at the floor as he was propped up on his feet and handcuffs applied. A man in white and a cop half dragged him out into the corridor and he was pushed into a slow march with a prod to his back. He barely opened his eyes, neither knowing where he was going or caring much either way.

He was locked down in the cold bright lightbox of one of the interview rooms, hands chained

to a metal loop at the centre of the table. Will had to resist the urge to let his forehead connect with the grey surface and to shut down again. If he was in the interview room, it probably meant that Alana was coming to see him, and some part of him was still responsive to her.

"Hi Will," she said, her head tilted, her face twisted with sympathy.

He looked to her with droopy eyes, knowing he had to look like the slow moving corpse of a familiar face.

"How are you doing?"

Will wanted to respond, he really did. He just couldn't quite get out of the fog.

"Hey," she continued, and reached for his hands.

There was a time he used to reach out for her, clinging to her for comfort and hope. Even though that was now beyond his ability, the soft touch of her skin was like a jolt to his system. Somewhere along the way, he had come to associate her touch with feeling human again.

"Alana," he muttered and stared at her hands.

She smiled at him, warmly. "You look a bit tired. Not sleeping?"

"Sleeping too much." His voice was so rough he barely recognised it. "All the world is a long slumber."

"I wanted to let you know that the appeal is looking good. Lionel is confident we can get some better conditions for you, if not a complete transfer out of here."

He swallowed. "Thank you." His words sounded pretty dispassionate, given that he had no confidence that anything would come of this. No one, not even Alana, believed he was innocent of the crimes he had been framed for. It seemed far fetched that he would ever see the walls of another building, or walk in the gardens of some mythological 'other facility' where such things were allowed.

"There's... something else."

He felt like drifting away again, half zoning out. A squeeze to his hands brought him back from the precipice.

"Will, stay with me. This is important."

A photograph was pressed onto the table between them, in his line of sight. All the shapes and colours were a nonsensical blur at first. It took him a moment to pull together the two faces depicted, and jolted at the vision of Hannibal Lecter staring at him. For a second, he was back in Lecter's office, having a seizure, his smiling face observing him like a cat watching a mouse.

Will turned his face aside, the unexpected emotions overwhelming him. Of all things, he couldn't handle seeing that face again. That face he'd trusted so much; the man who destroyed him.

"She's yours, Will."

He frowned. "Who is?"

"The girl." Alana removed her hand from his to point at the photograph. "Will, look."

He let his eyes float back to the image, only noticing the child the second time around. A little blonde thing was held in Hannibal's arms, arms wrapped around his shoulders, both smiling subtlety at the camera with identical expressions.

"Her name is Klara. She is a good kid. Really bright." Alana's smile blossomed like her surname would imply it could. "She loves your dogs. Winston is like a mother lion around her. Maybe he figured it out before I ever did, I don't know."

Will was still frowning at the image, some sort of butterfly floating around in the space behind his eyes, bringing with it colour and air.

Alana's hand returned to his, squeezing again, encouraging him to wake up and understand what she was saying.

"I debated whether to tell you about her. Hannibal didn't want you to know, but I think you need this. And Klara deserves to know you too."

Finally, it clicked in his mind, like the barrel of a gun slipping. "No," he groaned. "It's not possible." The first real emotion he'd felt in months hit him like a gunshot to the stomach, and only the hands holding him in place kept him from actually sliding off of his seat.

"I don't know what happened between you and Hannibal but this is why he walked away all those years ago. I think he was concerned about his professionalism being called into question."

A funny little choked laugh escaped Will; the first sound of its kind that he'd made in months, maybe years. He knew that Hannibal Lecter was a serial killer; the copycat, the Ripper, maybe more besides. Professionalism was not something he could ever be accused of.

Will stared at the little girl in the photo, chest swelling.

"She's beautiful isn't she?" The beaming light of Alana's grin made him want to shrink back from her. It was too much for his eyes,they were so used to the darkness.

He nodded and rubbed his hand across his mouth, over a stubbled lip, desperately trying to fight against the groundswell of feelings that threatened to overwhelm him. He had felt nothing but emptiness for so long it was too much to bear.

"There is still time to make things right. You are a good person, Will. I wouldn't have stuck with you for this long if I didn't believe that. This little girl deserves to know her father and you deserve to know her too. But in order to make that happen, I need you to fight. I need you to be stable and awake. Do you hear me?"

Will nodded again because he was. For the first time in a long time, he really was hearing every word.

"This appeal is resting on you presenting as stable as possible. Will, no more suicide attempts."

He stared again at the photograph, still hardly daring to believe that she was telling the truth. He blinked away a sudden waking nightmare, Hannibal's image replaced with the black skin of a monster with antlers and claws, clutching onto the child with demonic intent. His child.

"Will?"

"I understand," he said, calmly, though his heartbeat was pounding in his ears.

Alana left him then. She had made an arrangement with Chilton, her dear old friend, to let Will keep the photograph. He held it tightly as they dragged him back to the darkness of his cell and placed him back in the cuffs. Since he couldn't move, one of the orderlies took pity and stuck the photo up on the wall by his bed so he could turn his head and see it there.

Memories were flooding back to him, awful and vivid; chaotic for lack of use. In the first year of his incarceration, when his mind was discovering layer upon layer of recollections pertaining to Hannibal's sick manipulations under the guise of therapeutic practice, he had fought to find a way to prove Hannibal's guilt. Hannibal leaving Baltimore made it more difficult but he did everything he could think of to get someone, somewhere, to believe him. In time, he'd had to give up the chase. Accusing Hannibal made him look crazy and years were sacrificed upon the pyre. He learned that no one was going to save him and that the only choice he had was to either dwell on the hideous memories of Hannibal Lecter, or bury them and try to carry on living. He'd chosen to bury them, though the prospect of living on slowly lost its appeal.

Now his thoughts and emotions were rumbling, volcano-like, inside him. The taste of Hannibal, that rich sweet taste, was back on his tongue. He couldn't help but succumb to a note of involuntary arousal at the memory of the one night when Hannibal had been human and beautiful; when he'd let all of his defences drop and spread himself for Will's taking. The way Hannibal had looked in the dim light from that fire had left him breathless, those long legs descending to pull him close, the copper taste of blood from his split lip bursting on his tongue. Even if everything else had been a lie, he knew there had been an underlying truth to that unexpected turn of events. The man was a monster but he had needed him that night.

Now that he was alone and back in the silence of his cell, he was coming alive with questions. He could feel his blood rushing through his veins, his heart thumping, like he was a real person again. Will blinked away visions of Hannibal growing big with his child, that

lean form distorting, extending, with something that was his. Cells joined together in his mind's eye, duplicating and growing, and darkness growing in all the spaces inbetween.

Did Hannibal plan it all along? Will didn't think so, given that it had been five years and Hannibal had not made it known to him at any point. He'd kept it from Alana and everyone else too, presumably to ensure he wouldn't find out inadvertently. Yet there would have been no greater torment for Will than knowing he had accidentally created life in the very jaws of death, and he knew just how much Hannibal enjoyed to torment. Which made him wonder, if not to be used for that purpose, why did Hannibal keep the child? He had not been at all at home with his Inter genetics, that much had been very obvious to Will. Nor did he seem particularly interested in the idea of having children. Getting rid of it would have been the best solution and it wasn't as if Hannibal was in any way opposed to taking life.

Confusing. He looked at the photo, blocking Hannibal out and focusing in on the girl. Even in the dim light, he could make out the parts that were his and the parts that were not. Her eyes reminded him of the dim outline he recalled of his mother somehow. Just as Alana said, she was beautiful.

The more he looked, the more he felt sick with the idea that the monster who had cut off Abigail's ear while she was still alive and forced it down his throat, who had fed him human flesh on countless occasions, who had murdered so many people in the most sadistic ways possible, was the sole guardian of this child. No, not this child, *his* child.

Will cried without even knowing it, hot tears rolling down his temples and dampening his unkempt tufts of hair. It wasn't just for the idea that he was a father, the way he'd always wanted to be and never thought possible, given his unique mix of personality disorders, it was in frustration. Hannibal Lecter was the face he saw in the dark corners of his mind, when he slept, when he was drugged for Chilton's amusement, always there in the shadows, always watching and silently gloating. She was innocent and it wasn't fair. It had been his mistake to let her exist, she didn't deserve the life that awaited her, in the guardianship of one of the worst serial killers to ever exist.

He knew why Alana had brought the photo to him. Will had been dying; ready to die in fact. Five years of airless silence and metal bars had taken the fight out of him and he'd lost all hope. He'd come to the conclusion that no one would miss his absence, or mourn his loss. His lonely and disconnected life seemed to be reaching its natural end point and he was ready to embrace it.

But it wasn't just about him now. He couldn't stand the thought of Klara paying for his mistakes. She was just a little girl.

"Dr Chilton," he muttered. "Dr Chilton. Dr Chilton. Dr Chilton!" Every repetition was louder and louder, until he was shouting his name at the very top of his voice, demanding his presence.

Orderlies came and went, someone telling him to be quiet, but he wouldn't relent.

"Dr Chilton! Dr Chilton! DR CHILTON!"

He only stopped when he heard the clump sound of a cane in the distance, coming closer.

"Mr Graham, there is no need to create such a fuss," his jailkeeper said as he approached. "What on earth is the matter?"

"I want to see Jack Crawford."

"Oh Mr Crawford left some time ago. Given your lack of cooperation..."

"I want to see Jack Crawford," Will repeated, fixing him with a hard stare. "Tell him I'll help him."

The way Chilton hesitated, arching his eyebrow at Will cynically, only angered him. It felt good to be capable of anger again.

"Tick tock, Dr Chilton. Poor Catherine is waiting. Hurry along now, there's really no time to waste."

Chapter 4

He hadn't dreamed of the black creature bearing stag antlers, the wendigo monster with Hannibal's face, for a very long time. It used to live with him, behind the shadows cast by the raven feathered stag, an old but bitter companion. It came as quite a shock to see it again.

Will had dreamed the monster drew a place for itself in the shadowy corner of his cell. It had grown there, where one of the pipes was leaking and creating a damp spot of worn concrete, where the living cells of bacteria silently thrived. It had crawled out and crept towards him, leaving a black trail behind it.

He'd pressed his eyes closed as it cut his bonds with its long claws. Its breath had ghosted across his chest and Will had shivered. He'd pushed and fought as it climbed over him, trying not to look at its terrible visage.

In some leap of dream logic, the fighting had transitioned into a mating rut, the monster anchored against him and drawing him inside against his will. But as his eyes fluttered, the darkness had dissolved into a human face. His cell had become his living room, the bed his own. Hannibal had seemed radiant above him, hair tinged with light, even though he looked like the soul of sadness, head limp and hands tied behind his back.

Will had pulled his binds free and rolled him over, into the softer curve of his mattress, settling against him. He'd followed his urge to sooth this strange, boneless, guileless version of the vessel into which he desired to pour himself. He'd nudged his nose against Hannibal's cheek as he rotated his hips slowly, seeking connection, establishing his participation. Hannibal had slowly looked to him with tears in his eyes, on his cheeks, and Will had kissed them away.

He did not not understand why he had dreamed of Hannibal in that way. He recalled the split lip and the bruises across his flesh, remembered from the night they had made love and transplanted into his dream. Will supposed it was the half forgotten impression of some kind of vulnerability returning; Hannibal had subsequently become a truly inhuman thing in his psyche as all the memories of his later abuse returned in bursts; secret injections, seizure triggering light therapies, that tube sliding down his throat and his plastic gloved hands caressing his neck and face as he'd weakly struggled to breathe. He'd been at Hannibal's mercy so many times, he'd forgotten the one time everything had been different.

Yet Will had felt such tenderness and love in his dream. It surprised him with its vehemence. He'd kissed Hannibal and felt the gentle way it was returned. This time he was focused on the creative lifeforce he had the power to summon, as if it could save Hannibal's soul somehow for a piece of him to grow inside of his body. In his dream, Will had wanted nothing more than to make their child. He'd felt Hannibal's belly swelling as he took his pleasure freely, the sensation so sweet he'd woken up half hard.

The photograph of Klara and Hannibal was still stuck on his wall, beneath the dim light.

Sometimes he'd see Hannibal's expression as hard, dark, maybe even challenging him silently to act. Sometimes he seemed more wistful. Will traced the outline of Klara, his daughter, with his eyes over and over until he could imagine her standing beside him, as real as anyone he'd ever met.

Occasionally, Abigail Hobbs stood behind her, hands on her shoulders, smiling. Distantly, in the back of his thoughts, he saw her presence as an acknowledgement that Klara had had a prototype. Abigail was the daughter Will had given birth to, by subsuming the mind of her father and then ending his life, leaving Hannibal no choice but to step in and seal the circle, both of their hands bathed in her blood in the act of saving her.

He missed her, even now. It was easy to pretend that she had been an innocent when she had been all he had to think of. With Klara a new presence in his mind, Abigail was receding and growing darker; nearer to her true character in life than the pure version he had constructed and then clung onto until almost the end.

Little Klara existed in a spotlight of white, her smiling face never flinching from his, no matter what.

He lay in his bed for hours, imagining scenarios in which he was able to hold her to him and protect her from the monster that had already laid claim to her. He thought about running away with her, starting a new life, helping her shed all impressions left upon her by her birth father.

Then the bars of his cage were being rattled and there was no more time for idle fancy. The orderlies were there to take him away.

Will had played a delicate game to get these five minutes out of his cell, up in one of the offices, and had hated every second of it. His natural inclination had been, of course, to walk into the mind of Buffalo Bill and tell Jack every piece of retrieved information. A girl's life was on the line; this was so much more urgent that any other crime scene he'd ever profiled for the FBI.

But it was his opening. Time was of the essence and so he was in a position of power, for the first time in five years.

He'd told them something was in the throat of the last victim found, first girl killed, and that was how they'd discovered the unusual chrysalis stuffed down there. It gave him much needed credibility.

But there was more to tell. Will had demanded a satellite link up to Texas, directly into the office of Senator Catherine Martin, and to his slight surprise, it was all agreed. He'd also dictated an email to have sent to her office in advance as well, for good measure. That too was honoured.

Dr Chilton, Jack Crawford, and the small army of orderlies and security guards faded away to the back of the room as he approached the screen set up for him to speak to. She was a well dressed woman in her fifties, hair perfectly styled and not overdone with the highlights. Her

mahogany office looked clean and all the surfaces were well polished. She might have stepped out of a photograph from a political website. Only the sheen of her eyes betrayed her true levels of terror.

"Mr Graham," she said, by way of greeting.

"Senator Martin. Thank you for agreeing to this video link."

"I read your message."

Will nodded, sagely. He knew his only chance was to make her see past the jumpsuit and the line of law enforcement bodies behind him to the sane person he really was. "Thank you. I very much believe we can save your daughter."

Her responding smile was shaky at best.

"This killer keeps them alive for a few days because he's starving them, to loosen their skin. He's making a skin suit. A female one. This man believes he is transexual; he's likely been to several gender reassignment clinics and they will have turned him down. He is not a real transexual, he only thinks he is."

The Senator's forehead was creased with concentration lines. "So we should be checking for refused patients of gender specialist clinics?"

"There's more. The death's head moth he put in the throat of the first victim was a symbol of transformation. He probably breeds them. In taking the skin of his victims and sewing them together, he wants to become them. He covets what they are, their femininity. But how do we first start to covet?"

"We... see something and we want it."

Will nodded. "The first victim, Frederika Bimmell. The most recently found body. She's the clue. I read in the report that she was very proficient in making her own clothes. I believe he knew her, either through sewing - maybe he works in a craft store - or as a friend, though not one she was close to. She is the one he watched and wanted to become. The rest are just... raw materials." He gulped down a catch in his throat at the grim subject matter. "The killer will live near to her. They will have a connection. He might even have been looked at by the FBI and passed over already. He's not distinguished in any way, he's very plain. But that's how you will find him."

"That narrows down the search considerably," the Senator said, coaching her expression to avoid giving away too much but seeming grateful underneath it all.

"Senator, I have a daughter too."

Her mouth pursed. "As you stated in your correspondence. Mr Graham, I am sure you will appreciate that I have no power with regards to parental access arrangements."

"That's not what I need. I just need a chance. I will never see her if I'm in this place. As I explained, I wasn't conscious when the crimes I am accused of took place. I was suffering from viral encephalitis; that's a matter of record. I am no danger. I've served five years without incident. Please Senator, please. I need your help."

"There are due processes which must be followed," she said, sternly, causing his heart to skip a beat. Then her expression softened, just a little, just enough. "But Mr Graham, if your profile saves my daughter, you have my word that I will do whatever I can to help you in your appeal to be moved to a lower security facility as soon as possible... with enshrined visitation rights."

He let go of the breath he didn't realise he had been holding. "Thank you," he said, as sincerely as he could, and fought his out of practice muscles to smile at her. "If they act now, Catherine will be with you again soon."

He could see the flickering shadow of hope igniting across her eyes. In truth, he had nothing more than hope now too, but he wanted her to believe in his certainty.

Will had seen the brief echoing sound of opportunity the moment Jack explained who the missing girl was and why her case, above all the others, had elevated the story to international news level. The reputation of the FBI was at stake, with the eyes of the political elite narrowly focused in on them, and Will couldn't deny a private note of curiosity over Jack coming to him for help on this of all cases. Perhaps the hysteria over this killer was getting to his superiors and he was at a loose end.

Whatever the reason, Will had known this was his chance to go above the heads of the FBI and appeal to the considerable clout of a Senator, even one from another State. He hadn't felt this level of clarity for a long time. Not since he opened his eyes to find himself in the Baltimore State Asylum for the Criminally Insane, the encephalitis finally driven away, the true outline of Hannibal Lecter shedding before him.

When the feed shut down, he was returned to his cell. Will was strapped back down, prevented from walking around once again, but in his mind he was walking through bright meadows with a little hand resting in his. He was listening to childish laughter and breathing in fresh air. In the distance, the stag was looming, its presence turning the glow of the sun to darkness and shadows, and he was clinging onto the child at his side to stop it from taking her. He couldn't have her too. Will was determined to prevent it.

But when he looked down, he was holding onto a black feather, and she was already gone.

Chapter 5

Hannibal watched Klara and her piano teacher from just outside the doorway of his study, arms folded, a faint smile on his lips. Her playing was definitely improving in leaps and bounds.

He planned his next kill as he watched the lesson unfold out of sight, running through his options and calculating every possible outcome of every potential method he could use. Since Klara had kept her end of the bargain, and put some real effort into learning her piano pieces for that week, he would now make good on his promise to punish a specified child from her school who had been rather rude towards her of late.

The child in question was about to become fatherless. The man he would kill was an empty vessel, without merit or talent and therefore of no great loss to the world, even if he had not made any personal transgressions towards the Lecter household. The fact was, he was the breadwinner of that particular family, so his disappearance would almost certainly mean that the bully would need to move to a significantly less exclusive, non fee paying school. Punishment indeed.

Klara knew very well that Hannibal would always act on her wishes. She didn't know anything of how he did it, or any detail which might slip from the lips of a child without understanding of the consequences of speaking of certain things; just that she could rely on her father to keep his word in such matters. She was yet to grasp the vagaries of morality and so it was a novel thing for Hannibal to direct a life so completely to his way of thinking, so free of guilt or guile.

Like the contrapuntal practice piece that fell from her childish fingertips, their lives were an interlocking melody. If he were to choose a piece to reflect the life of his daughter, it would be the Tempest Sonata; it was consistently turbulent, but often in a quiet and subtle way to the eyes of the world. Klara was naturally extremely empathetic, yet her attempts to reach out to other children of her age had met with a wall of resistance or, more often than not, hostility. They could sense she was different. Hannibal imagined Will's childhood had been much the same; always the outsider, always the strange one. Klara was a great deal more comfortable with adults, able to communicate her thoughts and adapt to theirs far more effectively than was possible with the undeveloped minds of her peers.

Hannibal left the pupil to her lesson and took a seat in his lounge where he could still hear her play in the distance. He read, with interest, the front page update on the Buffalo Bill murder case seared across the front page of tattlecrime.com. Jack had already called him to let him know that the guy had been caught and his latest intended victim saved; a courtesy, since he considered Klara to have been helpful in that regard. What he hadn't expected was the tidbit given pertaining to the FBI consulting on the case with notorious former profiler Will Graham.

A thumbnail photograph of Will was included at the bottom of the piece, beside the note of his involvement, and Hannibal felt an unexpected swell of something unnameable

somewhere in the dark recess between his breastbone and spine at the sight of it. He ran his thumb over the image, against the smooth ipad surface, inadvertently smudging his own print over it. Hannibal had forgotten how beautiful his face had been; how the eyes that looked at him every day with perfect love and trust had first belonged to Will.

Hannibal was glad he had already made some very useful evening plans, with Jack Crawford due to join him for a friendly drink or two in celebration of the case closing. He cooked a simple meal for himself and Klara while she finished her piano lesson and, after they had eaten, let her play alone in her room for a while. As her bedtime neared, her heard her little feet padding down the stairs and smiled as she climbed onto him in his chair beside the fireplace, where he was reading to pass the time. She asked him to read something out loud to her. It amused him to flip back a bit and tell her about the Greek myth of Demeter, whose heart turned cold with wrath for all of mankind, starving the whole world of food, following the abduction of her daughter Persephone. On reuniting, her joy turned to sorrow, knowing that her child had eaten pomegranate seeds whilst in the Underworld and would always be compelled to return there because of it.

He watched her eyes flutter as he spoke, slowly closing, her little body fell limp in the crook of his arm where she was cradled, in the same position she always liked to curl into against him. Her head rolled against his shoulder and he couldn't help but lightly kiss her forehead when the story was done. She was the only creation on earth more beautiful to him than his art; a child that should never have been, but who he could never be without now.

Jack arrived just as he was about to put his daughter to bed. He opened the door with her dozing against his chest, arms curled around his shoulders. Hannibal lightly shushed Jack and invited him to make himself at home while he took Klara upstairs. He didn't miss the softness about Jack's eyes on seeing his child so adorably sleepy and boneless. Nature had robbed Jack Crawford of the opportunity for children of his own, and then fate had taken his wife, and so he really was a doting Uncle to the child he had shielded since the very beginning. For all the necessary falsehoods of their relationship, Hannibal liked Jack and was glad for his assistance.

He returned to the fireplace to find the man learning against the mantle, his eyes a million miles distant. Hannibal poured a drink for him and encouraged him to take a seat.

"Thank you," Jack said, and stared into the fire while he sipped at his whiskey. "I suppose you know that Will was the one who helped us find the killer."

"I have read that, yes. I imagine it was a disconcerting reminder of how he once was. Your most impressive bloodhound."

Jack tilted his head and frowned as though he hadn't thought of that. "In some ways," he said and shot Hannibal a penetrating look. "You seem to have guessed that I came here to talk about Will. Am I that obvious?"

Hannibal refrained from commenting. Instead he smiled, subtly.

"Alana was right. Knowing about Klara seems to have set fire to him. It's looking very likely he's going to get his transfer; took great pains to make sure his help with the Buffalo Bill case

would secure him some help in that regard." Jack took a larger gulp of his beverage than he should have. "He's hired a lawyer."

"Oh?"

"A parental rights lawyer," Jack clarified, carefully. "He doesn't stand much chance of course."

Hannibal was momentarily seized with a flare of something akin to the thrill of the chase. "Of course," he said, hiding his reaction expertly.

"It's still going to be your call. I'm only warning you that this could all get raked through the courts. It'll be public knowledge."

The calculations were already spinning fast through Hannibal's mind at the new game afoot. He saw at once how Will would now proceed. All he needed to do was threaten a lurid exclusive about a serial killer having a love child with his therapist, his near final victim even, for the likes of tattlecrime.com, to make a willing cooperation in relation to visitation rights seem like a better option. It wasn't about gaining a legal right to see his daughter, it was about showing Hannibal that he wouldn't be quiet about her parentage and that he could serious disrupt the shape of their lives. Location and therefore visitation would probably be no barrier soon, which placed Hannibal in the position of have to decide one way or the other.

Just as he'd always known, Will was capable of playing the game and playing it well. He'd been wrested of his chance to put him fully to the test. It was so tempting to throw his dice now and see what happened.

He knew he could be unspeakably cruel in this matter if he wanted to. If Hannibal asked his old friend Dr Chilton very nicely, he could arrange a really quite heartbreaking scene; Will's first chance to see his daughter, conducted from behind a screen of glass. Or even better, Will muzzled and trapped inside a straightjacket like a monster, while his daughter shied away from him.

"What do you believe I should do?" he asked, the scenarios he was imagining of less appeal than he thought they would be.

Crawford rubbed a knuckle on his greying temple and sighed audibly. "I know you had your reasons for keeping Klara away from all of... this. I don't know if anything's really changed."

"But?" Hannibal filled in the unspoken word which he was obviously leaning towards.

"Will needs this."

Hannibal sipped at his beverage, thoughtfully. "The question which concerns me is, does Klara?"

Jack sat back, apparently unable to answer that. They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, before he suddenly said, "Klara asked me about Will."

That surprised Hannibal deeply. He hadn't ever so much as mentioned him to her.

"Not Will, I mean... When I took her to the park a few weeks ago, she asked who her other father or mother was. All the other kids in her school have two parents and she wanted to know where hers was."

"I see." The thought of Klara asking such a question of Jack, instead of him, caused a tremulous note of upset in him. Hannibal was rarely surprised by anything in life, but that really did knock his breath out of him for a second. "What did you tell her?"

"I didn't. I deflected." Jack looked to him, sadly. "But she is going to have to find out one day. And Will is a good man. I still believe that. She should have the chance to know him. He's working very hard to try and make this happen; it seems wrong to keep her from him."

Hannibal stared into the fire, considering his options.

It would be several days before he came to a decision on what to do. And when he finally did, he waited until Klara decided to jump up onto his lap again before bedtime for him to read her to sleep, and stared into the fire as he told her, "I want to tell you a story about a man called Will Graham."

Chapter 6

Hannibal wasn't, by nature, the sort of person who felt anticipation. He anticipated a great many things by virtue of his calculating nature, but it was rare that anything inspired a genuine unbridled feeling in him. Yet the days leading up to his first drive to Riverside State Asylum were fraught with an odd tension that he couldn't seem to shake. He couldn't concentrate on his clients and couldn't find the clarity of thought required to hunt or cook with any sort of finesse. Hannibal was hesitant to put a name to the sensation but if it was anything, it was a raw pool of pleased anticipation, perched right on the cliff of his stomach.

He considered how best to approach the situation closely. Hannibal was very tempted to leave Klara with Alana or Jack instead of bringing her along, in order to gauge Will's state of mind for himself alone. But ultimately that risked rekindling some bad blood and a nasty scene regarding Hannibal's part in framing Will. It would be better to be able to concentrate on Klara and to be able to fade more into the background of her first meeting with her newly discovered father, than to retread old wounds of betrayal and abandonment with Will. He didn't think Will would want to rake anything up between them while she was present.

Besides, he couldn't deny the fire of his curiosity was gathering in the direction of seeing the moment they met. Will had fought to see his daughter and that made him feel... something. Pride, perhaps. He wanted Will to look at his child and see what he saw. He wanted that moment of victory as Will saw his own genetic legacy come to life before his eyes, entangled with his own and already so molded in his own image.

Hannibal had never intended for this day to come, but when the carrot of possibility began to dangle, he had decided to satisfy his curiosity. The die was cast and he agreed to take Klara to the asylum.

He wore a casual but smartly tailored pullover, hoping to appear more the parent than the professional, and he packed sandwiches, drawing books and a box of crayons into Klara's Dora the Explorer backpack. Hannibal helped her to pick out a pretty outfit and put a ribbon in her hair. The little girl was excited about meeting her newly discovered father and eager to look her best. The sentiment was quite infectious.

Riverside was bigger than Will's last site of incarceration and felt more like a large hospital than a prison. There were more people coming and going; parents, partners, friends, visiting their loved ones. The place smelled chemical and was quite odious to Hannibal's senses, and he noticed Klara wrinkling her nose the same way he would be doing if he didn't have an adult sense of control. Hannibal wasn't certain yet but he had some idea that she had inherited his superhuman sense of smell and fully expected the talent would hone and become more obvious as she grew older.

They were led through a public meeting area filled with tables, reminiscent of an open prison visitation area, and over towards a side room with a keycode entry system. Apparently they were taking extra precaution with Will and his visitation would take place in a locked down environment. An orderly barked out a list of instructions and cautions before they were

allowed to approach the door. Hannibal paid particular note of the number combinations to the various doors they had to traverse through the facility, storing them each away in his mind, just in case.

Finally, it swung open and Hannibal's senses were instantly overwhelmed with memories, summoned by the first taste of Will's scent on his tongue in so long. He took a moment to swallow them down before leading Klara inside, his daughter clinging onto his hand hard in uncertainty.

Will's expression remained passive but Hannibal could sense the storm inside him, half spilling out in the pool of sadness that lived at the core of his eyes. He was seated on his chair with his arms behind his back, handcuffed to a rear metal bar on the seat, and placed on one side of a table which was large enough to keep them well apart. He looked like a man who hadn't slept in days, barely clinging to consciousness with sheer determination.

The hardness at the edge of his eyes which struck at Hannibal softened as they descended to his daughter. A shaky smile formed at the corners of his mouth and Hannibal finally caught a glimpse of the Will he remembered so fondly.

He sat Klara down on one of the two chairs set on the other side of the table for them but she didn't want to be settled there, where the table came up almost to her neck. She immediately took off her backpack and climbed onto Hannibal's lap, making herself at home there where she could see across better. Hannibal momentarily forgot Will as he ensured she was comfortable and took out her drawing book and crayons, just in case she grew restless.

But Klara's eyes were indelibly stuck on Will, wide and filled with a nervous curiosity. Hannibal saw his expression mirroring hers, so exactly it was eerie, and felt a slight pull in his chest on her behalf. It was odd to see Will so untroubled by the intense eye contact.

"Say hello to Will," he prompted, gently.

"Hello," Klara said.

"Hi Klara," Will said, voice scratchy and hoarse. The wound to his neck was an angry red patch with a square of gauze at the centre and Hannibal wondered just deeply he had stuck that broken piece of plastic. "I'm happy to meet you."

"You look sad."

Will half chuckled and a more genuine smile reached his face. "I'm only sad that I haven't met you before now."

She nodded, accepting that explanation. "Father says..." she began, and then twisted around to look up at Hannibal, uncertainly. He gently urged her on, bemused that he was not being acknowledged otherwise in this strange family reunion. "Father says you got sick and had to go away."

"I suppose that's true." Will looked up at Hannibal, barely containing his hurt.

In response, Hannibal wrapped his arms tighter around Klara's little body, smiling. He pressed a kiss into the wispy blonde locks atop her head, never breaking eye contact until Will had dropped his gaze.

"I'd ask you why you kept this from me," he muttered, "but who knows why you do any of things you do, Hannibal."

It was interesting to know that time in the asylum had not broken Will. Not really. He hadn't accepted the narrative that he alone was responsible for the copycat killings while under the influence of a crippling viral disease. Will knew that Hannibal was the reason he was there.

"I am no more complex than most to those capable of looking."

Hannibal picked up Klara's backpack and removed their packed sandwiches. He placed them on the table in front of his daughter.

"Forgive us Will, but Klara has not yet had her dinner. I hope you don't mind. The drive here was quite long."

He'd made it very obvious that the miniature artisan sandwiches contained meat. A little test, to see just how much Will had figured out during his long hours of solitude.

"Your favourite," he whispered to Klara and encouraged her to pick one side of the sandwich up and take a bite.

Hannibal got his answer when Will paled and went grey at the sight of it. His arms strained momentarily against his blue jumpsuit as if he wanted to pull forward and to stop the little girl from taking a bite but knew there was nothing he could say or do. His anguish was captivating. Hannibal knew then that Will had figured out just who he really was and what he did.

She twisted around and grinned at Hannibal. "Special food."

"For a special girl."

Will's expression of barely concealed disgust bemused Hannibal greatly. The little thrill it inspired in him was like the fierce memory of an addiction returning; borne from a place inside him that was so rarely touched, but over which Will had always held a particular sway.

"I'm curious," Will snapped, "why are you doing this?"

Hannibal arched a questioning brow.

"Allowing me to see her."

The question struck at the heart of a difficult subject for Hannibal to adequately address. "You wanted to. I... did not believe you would wish to know of her before. I was surprised by the vehemence of your actions in aid of such an outcome, once Alana took it upon herself to inform you. And so, after careful consideration, I came to believe that you would pursue the matter insistently if I did not take action."

"You have granted visitation on your own terms," Will observed. "I have little recourse should you decide to withdraw it."

Hannibal couldn't suppress the smile which reached his lips at that. Will was as sharp as he remembered, his mind a beautiful vessel, capable of understanding his wheel of calculations in ways no one else ever had. Of course he had taken the course most potentially beneficial to himself.

He noticed that Will's expression had fixed onto Klara with utter dismay and saw that she had pushed the rest of her sandwich aside in favour of opening her crayons. She was holding the red one to her own neck, frowning, staring at the location of Will's wound. Klara moved her hand slowly down and back again, apparently making deductions about the angle.

"He hurt his neck," she told Hannibal. "Like this."

Hannibal gently took the crayon from her hand and put it back into the pile. "Klara, we must be polite." He opened her colouring book and handed the green to her. "Here, colour this tree." Then he turned his attention back to Will. "She sees too much. Associations come so quickly."

His sly smile was lost on Will. The prisoner had turned his head aside, eyes pressed closed, fighting for control. The muscles of his arms were straining inside his jumpsuit as though he were gripping the bar behind him.

All went silent for a little while. Will seemed too overcome to say anything more and Hannibal was content, for the moment, to revel in the sight of his barely contained emotion. It reminded him of all those times Will had been like clay in his hands, leaning to his soothing touch as his mind burned, passionate with the fear of his own sanity slipping away.

Klara coloured half of her tree before abandoning the project, sensing some level of tension in the air and reacting with restlessness. Impulsively, she used her father's knee as a step to climb onto the table. Hannibal watched her with curiosity as she began to crawl over the shiny surface towards Will.

He snapped his hand up toward the alarmed orderly at the door to indicate that no intervention was necessary. Hannibal was not the sort of parent who would generally deny his child the chance to act upon her natural curiosity. And she was a more curious child than most.

The little girl swung her legs over the opposite side of the able and rested a foot on one of Will's knees. Little hands touched his face to pull it back towards her. She used both hands then, learning his features in full, and Hannibal was pleased to see that his repeated lessons about learning things with more than just one sense had been heard by her; he had always encouraged her to see, touch, listen and smell to know something to the best possible degree.

"Don't be sad, Will."

A single tear broke free of Will's eye and rolled down his cheek.

"Father," she said, curving herself around to look back towards Hannibal, "can Will come home with us?"

Hannibal held out his hands to her. She crawled back across the table and leaped into his offered hug. While she folded against him, he made eye contact with Will over her shoulder. "Not today. But... perhaps another time."

"I wouldn't make promises you can't keep," Will said, his voice twice as hoarse as before.

To that, Hannibal smiled, wolfishly.

Klara turned and sat herself back down on his lap. She picked up the other half of her packed sandwich and began to eat it, smiling at Will with childish reassurance. Once again, Will was forced to sit in silence, watching her eat the fruits of her father's art; his darkness feeding her innocence and beginning the inevitable process of tainting it. While Klara held a natural desire to meet and to know her newly discovered slice of parentage in some way, she would always be his child and Will had to know that now.

It felt, as anticipated, like a wonderful private victory.

Chapter 7

Riverside State Asylum was definitely a step up from his previous place of incarceration. So much so, Will hardly dared believe it was real at first. So many well lit corridors and actual windows to the outside world, it was practically homely by comparison.

The facility was a mixed one, catering less frequently for the criminally insane than for the incidentally insane, rendering the ambiance a great deal less severe throughout. But Will was still locked down in the most secure wing as one of their most dangerous patients, unable to walk the grounds or spend much time with their other guests, aside from the worst ones in his block. There was also a heavier emphasis on drugs in this facility, designed to keep the patients placid. That served as a strong reminder that it was still just another jail cell at the end of the day.

His one great victory was being placed in a cell with a small barred window placed up near the ceiling. Will had wept through his first night there, when he stood on his new bed, looked out of the slit and saw stars in the sky. It wasn't long since he'd resigned himself to never seeing them again.

He'd spent so much time being referred to and treated like a murderer, it was easy to forget sometimes that he'd never done anything to warrant this hell of a living. In trying to save lives and do the right thing, he'd simply wandered into the path of a force of nature and hadn't seen it in time to jump out of the way.

This life was the ditch he'd landed in. For now at least.

He'd seen Klara four times now, in four months. The first time had been, by far, the hardest. He'd barely come to terms with the reality of her existence as a genuine flesh and blood being, so seeing her was overwhelming. The touch of her little hand to his cheek, the innocence in those eyes, had moved him deeply. The nausea he felt at the way Hannibal had taken great pains to stamp his claim on her stayed with him like a bad taste in his mouth.

The next time Klara was brought for a visit, he was more ready. He decided to be submissive and accepting; to ask after her as a concerned parent would - how is she doing at school? how is her health? what toys does she like? - so that his conversation with Hannibal was directed on his terms from start to finish. It was clear from the way Hannibal spoke about her that he had some level of genuine care for her, to whatever degree he was capable of it, and Klara doted on him in return, which was perverse and difficult to watch.

On their third meeting, Will smiled and tried to be fun and charming for Klara, telling her how she looked a lot like his mother and feeding her some stories about how he found each of his dogs. She had made it very clear she loved the dogs so she listened to him with a rapt attention that Will sensed made Hannibal bristle a little, until he toned it down and tried to include him. Will started with the subtle notes of manipulation, making it known that he wished he could be with them always, inviting Hannibal to free him.

And so, on the fourth meeting, Hannibal told him of how he'd had dinner with the Chief of Staff at Riverside, on a professional level, and had gained permission to give him some photographs to keep. Will hadn't immediately realised what their purpose was; only after returning to his cell and examining them did he notice the numbers on their reverses, small and barely visible under the light, flying just below the radar of the system.

A four digit combination, just like the door locks in the main areas. The key to the order he knew, almost immediately, was the age Klara appeared in the photos. Klara as a baby; 9 - Klara at her first birthday party; 4 - Klara as a toddler; 1 - Klara almost as old as now; 0. Therefore 9410 was the master key he needed.

But that wouldn't get him out of his cell. For that, he had to take a risk. He had collected up a lot of his tranquilising drugs and traded them with one of the malcontents in his wing for something a little stronger. He needed to look in bad shape for his plan to work.

Will wondered, as he began to sweat and feel its effect, why Hannibal hadn't simply staged a tableau, or planted evidence somewhere, to persuade everyone of his innocence. He supposed it was all part of the power play. This way, if he took the bait he would be a fugitive. He might be able to hide in Hannibal's house for a while but he wouldn't be able to stay forever without either becoming a prisoner or being discovered. So it was probably a crueler option in the end. Very Hannibal Lecter.

Just as well then that he was thinking a lot clearer these days.

He waited for the drug he'd procured to really take hold and then called for help as he began to effect a seizure. Sure enough, he was soon being hauled onto a gurney and taken to the infirmary wing, a sweating, writhing mess. He calmed the act as he was transferred to a hospital bed, pretending to be unconscious, inviting them to start tests to find out what happened without prescribing anything that might actually send him to sleep for real.

The infirmary was, as another inmate had confirmed, not too well equipped to deal with prisoners. There were no leather straps attached to the beds. Will had only one set of handcuffs to deal with, chaining his right hand to the railing of his bed. That was not a problem.

Will stayed still for hours, waiting for the right time to make his move. He made his move just shy of 2am. Many years ago he had learned to escape handcuffs by dislocating his thumb and had used it to escape custody and go to the one person he had thought he could trust; Hannibal. This time, things were going to play out differently.

He knew he would have very limited time to pull his plan off. Will flicked off the power to the old fashioned standalone heart monitor by his bed and silently slipped from his bed, crawling across the floor towards the nurse station. He managed to incapacitate the duty nurse very quietly from behind in a stranglehold. Will took his white coat and then placed him into the bed Will had vacated. He drew the curtains around to form a cubicle, legs still visible under the sheets but the face hidden, to make sure the changeover wouldn't be noticed immediately.

Then all he had to do was walk out of there with an air of confidence, using the door code Hannibal had imparted to get past the main doors of the facility. That was the difficult part done.

Everything hinged on what happened next, however. For all his careful planning, it now all came down to the kindness of a stranger.

Klara and Hannibal had not been his only visitors in the four months he'd spent at the facility. At first, he had reached out to his saviour with correspondence. The exchange of letters soon led to a careful test of the waters on his part which had left him quite positive as to the possibilities. The fish had taken his bait and, recently, had finally swam into his stream to meet him in person. He hated that he had to be so manipulative but it was his only chance of getting free.

Will acted as casually as he could as he went to the locker room to switch outfits into the nurse's casual clothes. It fortunately wasn't unusual for medical staff to pull late shifts at Riverside so no one was paying any attention as he walked out into the night. With the walls receding behind him, he headed out to the dimly lit road and looked around, heart beating so fast he thought he might pass out.

At first he thought there was no one there. Then a flicker of beams in the periphery of his eye caught his attention and he saw the car he was looking for.

Will didn't look back as he hurried to it and jumped into the passenger seat. "You came," he said and tried not to sound like it was the single most meaningful thing that had happened to him in his entire life, even though it felt that way.

"I nearly didn't." The young Texan woman said with a drawl, but smiled at him, wryly. The car was started up and they were on the road so quickly it was a marvel, like those five years under lock and key had never even happened.

The nightmares Catherine Martin still suffered lived in the dark rings around her eyes. The girl was a fighter, that much Will could say for sure. But it wasn't just about the time she'd spent in a dark well under a house which stank of rotting vines and dead flesh, waiting to be killed. It was about her inability to understand the glimpse of true insanity that she hadn't been able to reason with or argue against. Her whole world had been shaken and she'd peered into a darkness beyond her former imagination, and there was no one who understood what she had gone through.

No one except for Will. He'd done everything he could to impress that upon her. Although he had been necessarily cryptic in his letters, face to face he had told her about what Hannibal had done to him in uncomfortable detail. For the good of his daughter, he had swallowed his bile and told her some of the terrible things he had recovered in his memories; the injections, the seizures, the forced ingestion of a human ear. She couldn't help but see him as a fellow innocent wanderer who had been captured by something truly evil, thrown into darkness and left there to rot.

Catherine had been unable to rationalise her need to reach out to Will, but he had recognised and played on it expertly. Fortunately, her mother had been grateful enough for his assistance to discuss him with her daughter, and Catherine had taken the initiative in finding out the details of his case. She had read his email to the Senator as well and, for some reason, found him interesting. At least, interesting enough to respond to his letters and then, in time, to believe his protestations of innocence.

A gentle bark sounded from the backseat and Will couldn't help but smile. "Hey Precious," he said, reaching back to pet her soft fur, avoiding the splint on her leg. The dog looked a little sorry for herself, in need of a shear and a good bath as she was and Will couldn't help but feel a pang of need to make sure she received some attention.

"Oh now she makes a sound. Won't bark for me. Stupid mutt," Catherine mumbled, her feelings about the dog that had belonged to her captor still extremely mixed. While the dog was a constant reminder of what had happened, she hadn't been able to let her go. She had clung onto the little thing for six hours after her rescue, unable to let her go, her grip seized up with fear. She'd had trouble not having her around ever since. "I don't know why I brought her along."

"I know why."

She winced a little. "Yeah so, uh... where next? Where are we going?"

Will closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the car seat, breathing in the air deeply. He had a plan, indeed a very logical one. But something else was tugging at his thoughts already. "Are you ready to give Precious up?"

Catherine's eyes widened at the question and he noticed her hands grip onto the steering wheel tighter. He could see the rationalisations fleeting through her mind as to how that was impossible. "I... I don't know."

"You will never be able to move past your trauma if you keep her," he said, watching her reactions closely. "I know a place she can go where she'll be happy."

And that is how he found himself doing something breathtakingly illogical and contrary to his original plan of escape; sneaking into the home of the man who had ruined his life in the early hours of the morning, a small white dog clutched in his arms.

Hannibal's spare key was where it had always been, luckily, so it was a simple matter to leave his shoes in the car and gently pad through the dim light of the house he still remembered so well. Will even recalled which steps on the staircase would creak if he put his weight down too hard, which surprised him. He knew, by process of elimination, which room would be Klara's, and he took great pains to get to it silently, doing his utmost best to keep the dog quiet en route.

Will slid inside the bedroom and closed her door tightly behind him. The sight of her sleeping, snuggled tightly with a toy under her arm, gently illuminated by a nightlight, drew out a breathtaking feeling of love. He sat down on the edge of her bed and stroked her cheek

with his finger.

Slowly, she blinked awake.

"Shhh," he whispered, carefully, placing his finger against his lips. "It's just me. It's just Will."

Klara frowned a little, her eyelashes fluttering.

"I brought you a gift." Will placed the little dog down on the bed next to her and watched as she moved her hand to pet her, starting to smile through the haze of her sleepiness.

"For me?" Klara whispered, uncertain.

Will nodded, learning for the first time in his life that the oft spoken of sensation of having one's heart clench was not a poetic term.

"Why?"

"Well... when people are special to each other, they give each other gifts. This little girl needs someone to look after her. I thought you might like to."

"What's she called?"

"Anything you like. She's yours." Will stroked Klara's hair, overwhelmed by being able to perform such a simple gesture for the first time.

"Thank you." She beamed as the dog leaned into her petting, then looked at him with curiosity. "Father said you would come home soon."

He tensed, unable to find the words to say what he needed to say. Will had known it would be hard coming to see her, knowing that he had no choice but to abandon her now in order to save her later. In theory it was a hard choice to make and in practice it was even worse.

Will was startled as Klara sat up and leapt to her knees with childish agility so she could throw her arms around his neck. He let his arms slowly raise to reciprocate and held her so tightly he worried he might stop her from breathing.

For a moment, he seriously contemplated taking her and running into the night: just wrapping her up in his arms and never letting go until they were both free of the monster in the other room. But he wasn't an idiot. Klara was not his, however much he wanted her to be, however much he dreamed of her. She loved her Father, as innocently as any child might. He'd seen enough of their interactions to know that all too well. Will had barely gotten the chance to get to know her. To take her now would destroy any chance he had of forming a real bond with her.

Though it physically hurt, he gently had to let her go. "Klara, I have really enjoyed getting to know you. I'm so proud... that you're mine. My daughter." He just needed to say it out loud.

"But I have go away for a while. So be a good girl and go back to sleep. Can you do that for me?"

She obediently lay back down under the covers of her bed, stifling a yawn. "Tuck me in?"

Will did as he was asked, dreaming in the back of his mind of how different all of their lives have been if he had been able to do this every night; if Hannibal had been a normal man, capable of the love Will had once been willing to give in return.

Klara stared at him for a moment and then reached over to her nightstand. She then took hold of Will's hand and dropped something into it.

He looked and discovered a small gold chain with a heart on it. In the dim light, Will made out her name delicately inscribed onto it.

"When people are special to each other they give each other gifts," she whispered with a note of amusement.

Will thought he should have put it back but the gesture was so sweet, so touching, he could do nothing but nod, shakily, trying not to choke up. "Thank you." He smoothed down her covers and gave the dog a last stroke.

Then he left, as quietly as he came, the small piece of jewelry clutched in his palm as though it were the most precious thing he'd ever held.

"Was... was it all okay?" Catherine asked, unable to hide her nervousness now that Precious was gone.

Will nodded. "You made a little girl very happy."

It didn't seem to comfort her much but she tried to smile a little. "Right. So where next?"

That was the question Will had been dreading.

His initial plan, to defy Hannibal's expectations that he would run to him - that he would be able to harbour a fugitive or, more accurately, a prisoner in his home, beholden to whatever petty tortures Hannibal could devise - by laying low in Texas for a while was no longer feasible. The dog was recognisable enough to set Hannibal on the trail to Texas pretty fast. So that was out.

Will knew that he had traded Catherine's safety for that moment with Klara.

It alarmed him that he didn't feel any guilt over it.

"Let's start with Texas. After that, we'll see."

Will stared up at the stars through his window all the way there.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> I think the way interest/comments drop off on my fics after the first few installments proves I probably need to make these things shorter! This one was supposed to be a bit longer and more intricate, but decided I might as well close it down. Hopefully still works okay as a closure.

Will didn't really know what he was expecting. There was no ceremony to the moment he heard a delicate knock on his motel room door, seemingly indistinguishable from any other, but completely familiar to him somehow.

It was late, but he hadn't been able to sleep. He had known that Hannibal would come for him tonight.

This wasn't the plan he'd originally put together, but he'd known that the moment Hannibal saw the dog he'd impulsively given to Klara, he would put two and two together. A photo of Catherine clinging onto the little pooch as she was led from Buffalo Bill's lair by a torrent of FBI agents had been splashed across the media for weeks. Hannibal had known Will had consulted on the case, so it was a simple step for him to figure out that she had helped him somehow.

Will knew that if he stayed with Catherine for long, her chances of survival would be rapidly diminished. For all that he had manipulated her into helping him, he still cared about her and fully intended to try and keep in touch, if possible. He couldn't bear the thought of her being in danger on his account.

So he'd asked her to drop him off a roadside motel and gave her one of the tattered business cards from the front desk. "When Hannibal Lecter comes, give this to him. Tell him... I'm waiting for him."

It was raining out, heavy sounds of rattling against every cheaply made window setting his nerves on edge. There was no way to sleep or rest; all he could do was anticipate that knock.

He still answered it very slowly.

And there he was, standing under a large umbrella with a carved walnut handle, looking at Will with the same expression he had worn so many years ago when he had first walked into a Minnesota motel room Will was staying in and fed him the lungs of the victim he was investigating.

"May I come in?"

Will turned back into the gloom and sat down on the edge of his bed, arms splayed out, expression weary. "What took you?"

"This place was difficult to find, given the weather." Hannibal strolled inside and set his umbrella against the dingy room heater. He removed his jacket and carefully set it over a chair in the corner.

"Where's Klara?" Will asked.

"Alana is taking care of her tonight. Precious too, of course."

Will felt a wry smile tugging at his lips. The entire situation was just about absurd enough to tip him over some sort of edge he hadn't known he'd been teetering on. He watched Hannibal set down the bag he was carrying and then take off his wet shoes. He took a moment to align them perfectly together, as if he were a welcome guest, reinforcing the strange unintentional humour of the situation he was in.

"Are you going to kill me?" Will asked, calmly.

"Why would I wish to do that?"

An insane and horrid bark of laughter escaped the tatters of Will's throat. "The Chesapeake Ripper doesn't tend to leave loose ends."

It might have been his imagination, but Will thought he saw a note of hurt pass across Hannibal's features.

"Moreover, you don't exactly have any further use for me now, do you? It would have amused you to keep me as a locked up pet in your home, watching me pretend to be docile and obedient for the sake of our child. This unexpected diversion was not your design." Will swallowed, hard. "I'm not going back to Baltimore, Hannibal. Never."

Hannibal settled himself on a wooden seat next to the small table by the window, angling it towards Will. The room wasn't large. Will knew he had to save the few hundred dollars Catherine had been able to lend to him and extend it as far as possible, so he'd picked the smallest, dankest double available. As a result, if Hannibal leaned far enough forward, he could have touched his knee. It was uncomfortable for Will's senses but he maintained his control all the same.

"I do not plan to kill you," Hannibal said.

"Then why did you come?" Will snapped, anger bursting out like steam from a heat pipe valve. "Why couldn't you just leave me alone?"

It took a long time for Hannibal to choose his words. "I missed you. I don't want you gone from my life, now that you are part of it again. I want you to continue to know our daughter."

"Our daughter, ah yes." Will stood up, arms folded, pacing the sparsely carpeted floor. "Our daughter, who you feed human meat to and god knows what else. Tell me, Hannibal, how long did you know you were pregnant? Was it before or after you framed me for murder?"

Hannibal was about to speak, but Will stopped him before a sound was made.

"Actually, no. Don't tell me. I can't believe a word you say."

Hannibal tilted his head as if trying to understand. "I wouldn't lie to you Will. I had no idea, of course."

His gentle tone of voice only served to infuriate Will more. "You're so full of shit," he growled. "So here we are. I'm an escaped mental patient on the run and you get to keep on killing whoever you want..."

"Will, please calm down."

"You don't have the right to tell me to do anything! You destroyed me!" He pushed Hannibal back in his chair and leaned in at him, menacingly. "You fucking destroyed me. Are you happy now? Is this why you came, to gloat? Does it make you feel good seeing me like this?"

Hannibal stared at him as he yelled, frowning. When Will stopped, he suddenly gripped him by the shoulders and held him tight as he kissed him, taking full advantage of Will's gasp of surprise to deepen it and force his tongue into his mouth.

"No!" Will yanked out of his grip and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, accusing him with his eyes.

"I'm... I'm sorry Will. I should go."

Will slowly sank back down onto the bed and watched Hannibal's usual grace and precision of movement flutter into chaos in his attempt to put his shoes back on. He looked, for want of a better word, startled by his own actions. It was odd to see in a man who made calculating his every move an artform.

The anger Will felt melted and pooled into something else. He realised that it was curiosity. "It... it wasn't all an act, was it? That night... the night we... I felt something real and I thought you did too. Was I wrong?"

Hannibal seemed to be watching his own reflection in the shine of his shoes. It took a long pause before he seemed to be able to answer. "No."

"Then why? Why did you do this to me? Five years, Hannibal!"

"At first, it was only ever to help you to see the things Jack Crawford needed you to see. As for the rest... it's simply my nature. I knew you would see me eventually. I feared my own loss of freedom and so I traded in yours."

Will nodded, sadly. "You're insane," he said, his voice breaking.

"No more so than the world itself is." Hannibal slowly rose to his feet. "Will, if you believe nothing else I say, I would have you believe that I never feigned my regard for you. I wanted to shape you into someone capable of understanding me. I wanted you by my side, even knowing everything. Klara was... not intended in any way. Some inters are able to bear children very late in life but it is rare; it did not consider the risk. When I discovered my condition, there was no choice but to walk away from you for her sake." This time, it was Hannibal's turn to swallow hard, finding it difficult to speak.

Deflated, Will leaned forwards, resting his elbows on his knees and letting his face fall into his hands. "This is such a mess."

He heard, rather than saw, Hannibal pick up his coat and umbrella.

"What do you plan to do now, Will?" he asked, gently.

"Let's see now," Will responded through his fingers. "What do people do when they have no home and no place to go, when they've been betrayed by the one person that really mattered to them, when they have no way to ever see their only child again?" Again, that bitter laugh was trying to break free of him. "Who knows what they do."

Hannibal's hand on his shoulder startled him. The man had moved across to him silently. He hated that he reaction, rather than revulsion, was to lean in as the tears started to fall from his eyes. No matter how hard he fought it, desperate as he was not to cry in Hannibal's presence, they simply wouldn't stop.

Before he knew it, Hannibal was pulling him up into what started as a hug but which quickly turned into another passionate kiss, the umbrella clattering to the floor from his hand on one side, his coat landing in a heap on the other.

It was as if he was trying to devour Will's pain, hungry to take it in. Will had no idea what he was doing anymore but his strength was leaving him. It was the first time anyone had really touched him for so many years, the rush it produced in his system was overwhelming. He groaned through the kiss, not knowing whether to push him away or simply stop breathing and surrender.

Things progressed too quickly for decisions to be made. Hannibal clawed at his clothes with an urgency he hadn't shown even on that one night of passion all that time ago. Will knew then that Hannibal hadn't lied; there was something, intangible, terrible, irresistible, that curled inside them both like snakes waiting to strike.

Will was passive only long enough to be divested of the poorly fitting clothes that had one belonged to an ex boyfriend of Catherine's but had been left in the back of her closet, gathering moths. Then he fought back, tugging and pulling at Hannibal's finer ensemble, determined not to just to remove them but to ruin them. He wanted Hannibal to walk out of there like a man torn apart, buttons missing, fabric tattered and soiled.

He pushed Hannibal down into the centre of the bed and roughly landed on top of him. There was no question that, despite Hannibal initiating things, Will was the one in control now. Their bodies slotted together perfectly, bellies filled with fire as heated skin slid against heated skin. Will pinned Hannibal's hands down over his head as he moved, not caring if he was pushing hard enough to bruise him. Will had no idea what was happening, lost in a whirlwind mix of hate and anger and unreasonable painful love. Everything centred on the need to punish Hannibal and show him what he'd taken from them both.

Hannibal tongued at the scar on his neck, lapping at it, making Will hiss and surge against him. He drew back and dragged Hannibal down the bed a little by his legs, tilting his hips upwards. He didn't much care if Hannibal was ready or not for what he needed, but when he reached down to ease himself forward, he discovered Hannibal was near dripping with arousal, his body crying out to be filled up.

It was nothing like it had been the last time. There was no gentility to be found. No real finesse or care. Will slid himself home with a sharp push of his hips and then opened him up so hard Hannibal would have been torn if he had been less wet for him. Nothing was going to stop Will from claiming his prize, hips snapping back and forth and rutting in a blind fury. Hannibal was having the wind knocked out of him but he was still moaning into Will's mouth with furious pleasure, taking everything Will had to give and still begging for more. When he released his hands to get greater purchase, he hissed at the feel of Hannibal's fingernails digging into the creases of his back, marking him.

Through the haze, Will found himself pressing his hands around Hannibal's neck in retaliation, restricting his air. Hannibal didn't fight him. He watched Will closely, still moving in time with him. This careless act had no possibility of lasting very long, but even Will was surprised by how fast he was overtaken by his need to come. He pressed in hard and flooded Hannibal's insides with no small amount of triumph, then grimaced through the semi-orgasm it triggered in return.

The edges of Hannibal's vision were beginning to fade to black, his face red and bulging, by the time Will decided to release his throat and let him breathe again. Then Will was crawling down his body like a spider, licking the sweat from his skin, pausing to worship his overly soft and sensitive belly with his hands and his tongue, until he was positioned to be able to draw Hannibal's throbbing hardness into his mouth to finish him off.

It didn't take long at all, but Will wasn't done there. Instead of swallowing his release, Will climbed up to him and launched into another deep kiss, making Hannibal drink it all down, tongues sliding together around the viscous fluid as he did. Finally, Will let himself collapse, panting, on the other side of the bed.

They lay there for a while together in silence, no longer touching, the sound of the raindrops on the windows filling the room with something tangible to focus on. Eventually, Hannibal rolled aside and started putting his clothes back on.

Will watched him, exhausted from seeing his anger burn so brightly and then fizzle out at last. "I guess this is goodbye," he muttered when Hannibal looked about ready to leave. The

words were ashes in his throat.

Hannibal's gaze lingered on him for so long it made him feel a little queasy. "Stay here, in this motel, for a few more days. You will receive a package. I think you will want to see the contents."

"What if I don't want your package?" Will tried to sound defiant but he wasn't up to much now. He felt completely burned out.

The only response he received was a sad sort of frown. It was shot in his direction as Hannibal pulled at his overcoat, trying to disguise the ruined state of his clothes underneath. "It will be from Klara, not from me," he said, and then left.

Will stared at the flimsy door for a while, trying to rationalise what had just happened. It hadn't felt triumphant, exactly, to satisfy his anger by satisfying the lust that lurked behind it. More, it felt righteous somehow. Like he had been owed it.

He reached over to his nightstand and pulled the necklace Klara had given to him out of the drawer. He stared at it for a long time, wondering what to do.

In the end, the decision was an obvious one, if not an easy one.

EPILOGUE

The ocean really was the same shade as Will's eyes. He'd imagined it was a number of times when he'd last sat on the porch of his private vacation home in Florida, but now he was able to do a like for like comparison, it seemed even more poetic.

Living in a beach home, in a sunny climate, with a small patch of private beach, had transformed Will Graham. He had arrived there a pale and unkempt creature, still rattling the invisible chains that gave him nightmares, and grown into a tanned siren with the musculature of someone who was used the more physical work of fixing boat engines for a living. His long brown curls had taken on a windswept grace and his face looked alive again. He was, for want of a better word, breathtaking.

Will was still guarded around Hannibal. That much would never change, Hannibal knew. But there had been a lot of progress.

Hannibal reflected on his decision to encourage Will to start a new life here. He'd sent a key and an address card to that cheap motel, wrapped in a bow, with some extra money and a note from Klara rolled in for him to read, hoping he had remained there long enough to receive it.

Dear Will,

Father asked me if I wanted to see you again and I said yes. So he has given to you a house so I can come and visit lots. It is a secret.

Thank you for the puppy I have named her Dora. Her leg will be better in three weeks.

Klara

It gratified him to learn that Will had kept that note. Hannibal had found it in a drawer in the house on his first visit to see Will there, with Klara, and smiled at the memory of how freed he had felt when he'd decided to cast logic and wisdom to the wind and act on his feelings instead. He had so many reasons to kill Will Graham but, in the end, it didn't matter anymore. It would be difficult for Will to expose him now. And Hannibal wanted him around enough to take the risk.

It had become remarkably like a custody arrangement. He drove down to Florida a least two weekends in every month now, and had even allowed Klara to stay with Will for a few weeks when her school went to recess. She had returned to Baltimore a committed vegetarian (for a few days), but generally the arrangement was amicable. Will loved her too much to risk Hannibal not bringing her to visit him, so he was careful not to rock the boat.

While Will could be quite moody towards Hannibal sometimes, his emotions constantly vacillating between love and hate, the tone of their occasional lovemaking just as unpredictable, there was no denying that he was proving himself to be a capable father to Klara. Hannibal enjoyed watching them together, playing catch on the beach with Dora nipping at their heels, building sandcastles, taking dips in the ocean. It filled him with a curious sort of warmth that he didn't quite know how to name.

He was looking forward to seeing it a great deal more often, given that he and Klara were going to have to remain there for a while longer than scheduled, though he hadn't yet broached the subject with Will.

Hannibal sipped at the lemonade he had made and took a seat on the porch, in the shade, where he could continue to watch his unexpected family interact. He was a great deal more placid and contented than normal, his system adapting once again to the instinct to protect instead of hunt, leaving him happy to lean back on a recliner and stroke the subtly expanding curve of his belly. He was quite certain that Will would be pleased by the news; if not right away, then at least after being given some time to get used to the idea.

The sound of his daughter and her daddy laughing together as they played was remarkably soothing to his ears.

End Notes

I originally prompted this idea on the meme, but since no one filled it, I thought I'd give it a stab myself.

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